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December 15, 1978

Dear Mr. Cleveland:

Thank you for your letter of November 30 in which you request on behalf of your constituents, information about the U.S. response to the Guyana tragedy.

The tragedy of Jonestown has no parallel. On Sunday, November 19, the U.S. Government faced a crisis situation in Guyana. An American Congressman had been killed as well as other Americans in his party. A settlement believed to include about 1000 Americans was involved, and its situation was uncertain. It was apparent that the limited transportation and other resources of the Government of Guyana might be insufficient to cope with these events in an isolated area 120 miles from the capital. Medical evacuation for the injured Americans by U.S. military aircraft was immediately authorized, and the U.S. Government offered assistance to the Government of Guyana to prevent further loss of life.

The Guyanese indicated they needed helicopter lift and other support. As events progressed, it became clear that there were large numbers of Americans dead. For a time, it was believed that there might be many survivors in the jungle, and the U.S. adjusted and increased its assistance to help the search by Guyana police and military. Finally, when the number of dead was clear, the operational requirements were to continue support of the extensive ongoing investigation of serious crimes and to identify, treat with dignity, and remove the bodies as quickly as possible to a facility that could deal with this immense problem. Extensive mortuary facilities were essential in the process of identification and investigation. Only the U.S. military had the equipment and facilities to handle this enormous problem.

The Honorable
James C. Cleveland,
House of Representatives.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
RETYPED BY _____ DATE _____
EXEMPTIONS

The removal of the bodies from Guyana was at the specific request of the Government of Guyana.

The President, acting under his constitutional authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, ordered the departments of our government to take action to deal with this emergency. The operational decisions within the U.S. Government in this unique situation were made by the Secretary of State in conjunction with some of his Cabinet colleagues.

The federal government does not pay the expense of bringing back the remains of Americans who died abroad. That is a responsibility of their families or, if no next of kin can be found, the country where the death occurred is responsible for burial. It was evident, however, that it was beyond the ability of individual families or of the facilities available in Guyana to resolve the unprecedented problems that characterized this situation. In fact it was not even clear who the next of kin were without identification being established. The families of those who died at Jonestown are, of course, expected to bear the responsibility for the disposition of the remains in the United States.

The costs to the United States Government of an effort of this magnitude obviously are considerable although substantially less than the $8 million figure used in some press reports, but it will be some time before the total is known. The Office of Management and Budget, together with other agencies, is reviewing the financial aspects.

The Department of Justice is fully exploring possible legal remedies which can be used to recover the cost the U.S. Government has incurred in removing and processing the bodies of Americans from Guyana. It will be some time before the results of these efforts are known, but you may be assured that we continue to make every effort to keep the costs to the U.S. Government to the minimum necessary.

Concerning your question regarding the use of American flags, we have not heard of American flags being used on the coffins as they arrived at Dover Air Force Base. Congressman Ryan's casket was, of course, draped in the American flag when it arrived in the United States.

If you have any further questions, you may wish to contact Deputy Assistant Secretary John Bushnell in our Bureau of Inter-American Affairs on 632-8562.

Sincerely,

DB/cw

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for
Congressional Relations

Drafted: ARA/CAR:RZimmermann:mjb
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Clearances: Inter-agency
ARA:GLister
ARA:JABushnell
H:ENef

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JAMES C. CLEVELAND
2D DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION
HOUSE ADMINISTRATION
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November 30, 1978

4 ACTION is assigned to ARA

Mr. Douglas Bennet, Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations
2201 C Street, N.W. Room 7261
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Bennet: Re: Guyana

Several constituents have contacted my office expressing opposition to the United States involvement in the removal of cultists bodies from Guyana.

On behalf of my constituents, I would appreciate your allowing me a report on the following:

a. The statutory authority for expending public funds on the body lift from Guyana.

b. Who authorized Armed Forces personnel for the airlift.

c. Who authorized the use of American flags to cover the coffins.

Your consideration and advice will be appreciated.

Sincerely,

James C. Cleveland
Member of Congress

JCC:mh

FAR/IR DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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